



Making Meaning at U of T

Design Thinking Summary and Insights
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Introduction

The Multi-Faith Centre (MFC) is a service provider under the Division of Student Life that aims to “[support] the spiritual well-being of everyone on campus and provide opportunities for people to learn from each other while exploring questions of meaning, purpose and identity”.¹ To better understand how their services are currently being used by students and identify opportunities for improvement, the Multi-Faith Centre partnered with the Innovation Hub in 2018-2019 to answer the following questions:

- What are students thinking and saying about the MFC?
- How can the MFC meet the spiritual needs of all students in their search for meaning, purpose, and identity in everyday life?

Using design thinking methodologies, the Innovation Hub conducted a series of semi-structured, empathy-based interviews with a variety of students across campus about their experiences with the MFC. These students represented a number of different faith backgrounds, as well as different levels of familiarity with the Centre.

A number of conclusions were drawn from students’ experiences with the Centre and with their own experiences of making meaning and practicing spirituality—namely, *that students are able to make meaning through participation in multiple, intersecting spheres of life*. These spheres inform the key themes discussed in this report: **Community and Belonging**, **Finding Purpose and Understanding**, and **Pursuing Positive Emotional Experiences**. We also discuss a fourth theme specific to the role of the MFC: access and **Barriers to Engagement**. Each theme is divided into insights, which form the basis for design principles that should be considered when designing future programs, services, and spaces at the MFC.

¹ <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/mf>

What is Faith? Applying a Design Thinking Framework

Many academic studies point to faith and religiosity as indicators of social and psychological well-being, as well as heightened life satisfaction². Why is this? Rather than understand faith simply as a series of beliefs and practices, we approached the concept using a design thinking framework. If faith is capable of positively impacting its practitioners, it must be fulfilling a number of their needs that may otherwise may not be met.

A study³ published in 2019 examined this concept closely, drawing on existing literature to suggest that the relationship between faith and well-being stems from a number of mechanisms embedded in religious practice: **social support, meaning in life, and positive emotional experiences**. The authors further suggest that positive emotional experiences occur because religion offers opportunities for **emotional regulation** via cognitive reappraisal, wherein practitioners reassign meaning to positive and negative experiences so that they are value-consistent. This allows practitioners to better deal with stressful situations (e.g., “I may be struggling right now but I have faith that God has a plan for me”) and amplifies positive emotions (e.g., gratitude, awe) associated with good experiences. In summary, faith and religion fulfill the following human needs:

- 1) **Community and Belonging:** Practising faith provides membership to a community of people with shared beliefs and values. Access to social support is correlated with lower psychological distress and heightened resilience.
- 2) **Finding Purpose and Understanding:** Practising faith provides a comprehensive meaning-making framework for understanding the world, and addresses “fundamental questions relating to death, suffering, pain, and injustice”.⁴ A sense of meaning and purpose is linked with greater life satisfaction and self-esteem.
- 3) **Pursuing Positive Emotional Experiences:** Practising faith provides opportunities (e.g. prayer) for experiencing and reflecting on positive emotional experiences and for reframing negative emotional experiences so that they are value-consistent.

Applying this line of thinking to our own project, we reframed faith and religion as a **multi-faceted answer to basic human needs**. Understanding faith through this lens, the need to differentiate between faith groups lessens, and it becomes easier to see how non-faith students can be accounted for in service design and programming. Thus, these spheres form the basis of the themes highlighted during the design process.

² See reference list

³ Allon Vishkin, Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom, and Maya Tamir, “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life: Religiosity, Emotion Regulation and Well-Being in a Jewish and Christian Sample,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20, no. 2 (February 2019): 427–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9956-9>.

⁴ Ibid, p. 428.

Theme One: Community and Belonging

Students overwhelmingly say that their personal networks are essential aspects of their lives, either acting as key support systems, or in some cases, giving life meaning and purpose. Having reliable access to these support systems contributes to increased resilience and psychological well-being.

Insights

1) Familiarity and Reliability

While students often express a desire for a larger sense of community, they primarily value their reliable and longstanding connections (as opposed to acquaintances) as a source of support, security, and personal fulfillment. Such connections are often attributed to family members and close friends *outside* of the university, but could also be found in friendships on campus.

“I actually love [going to the same school as my sister]. I honestly think it has a big impact. I love the days when we take the train together. We don’t spend much time during the day ‘cause she has a tight schedule on the day that I’m free. But I like that we commute together, to school and from school, like those little conversations motivate me, so I appreciate that...”

“So to make that short, when [my aunt and grandma] finally got to come to Canada as refugees, we were really happy. That is something that I try to remind myself more and more every day, because I feel like I take my grandma and aunt too much for granted, and they spend a lot of time, like looking out for us, taking care of us, and I feel like I’m just really passive when it comes to paying attention to them in my life. So, I feel like it’s just too easy to come in and out of the house, trying to do school and do work and do everything else—that I’m not paying that much attention to them, and I should think more back to the days when I was sad when they were not moving with us. Umm...so...I think family is part of the meaning of life, and I’m taking that for granted....”

“[I feel like life has meaning when] I can bring happiness to my friends, to my family... [Interviewer: When did you realize that?] Because one my friends said that, ‘I can’t imagine, um, my first-year university life without you.’ I realized that, ‘Wow, I’m so...I’m so important to someone.’”

“Yeah, [meeting new people is] also a great part of my stress. I forgot to mention—because I need to know a lot of people—I need to build a connection network, especially because I study finance. I guess we’re supposed to have a network to be successful in a career. But I’m not very good at socializing. And especially not good at meeting new people. Yeah, so the simple answer is just...I don’t connect with other people. I haven’t made a lot of friends since I’ve come here. But the friends I have are close friends and very good friends. Just to be honest, if it’s up to me, I just need a small, close friend circle. And that’s enough for me. I still...I’m still in contact with some of my best friends from high school and they are who supports me.”

[On whom they feel most connected to] “My family and my friends—I think it’s the little things [...] [They] are there with you every single day, [so you sometimes] take them for granted. But those are

actually things that make you the most happy, because—friends and families—[they’re] the people who are there with you through thick and thin.”

2) Proximity and Opportunity

Students tend to form social connections to people they frequently interact with, such as others who attend the same classes, study in the same faculty, or live in the same residence. However, this preference for slow-building trust and connection can be overcome by opportunities that heavily promote socializing and meeting new people, such as frosh week and orientation events. Such events require students to “put themselves out there,” but participants can mitigate discomfort or anxiety by rationalizing that most attendees are in the same situation.

“[...] The archaeologists are a fairly tight-knit group. And so there's always been a sense of community, even within the department for me. And I suppose that starts with the first year I was here, as a Master’s student, and just having the senior PhDs who are in archaeology, just look at you and say, ‘Oh, you're an archaeologist too,’ like, ‘come with us,’ and get incorporated into all of the things that they do.”

“Yeah, [finding connections on campus] is pretty difficult. So I try to get involved in...I guess events outside of my department, such as [this student group] and a quality improvement project that I'm working on. I try to read newsletters from other faculties as well to see if things are introducing that I would be interested in. Yeah. So how do I make connections with people? Yeah, I think more if I see the person more than once at particular event, and then maybe get their contact information and talk a bit more. But for the most part, I probably just talk to people and enjoy their company for whatever time it is, and then carry on with life.”

“I disagree with the idea that the bigger the school is, the more isolated you are because [UTSC] is smaller but I feel like I have more meaningful connections here. I had my old high school friend in Scarborough, but they were in different programs. Here, I have [lists friends], and it wouldn’t be possible if both of us didn’t actually go out of our way to make those connections, you know? So, I think like it depends. It’s not about the bigger campus, it’s about putting yourself out there.”

“I always feel great connection during frosh week, both as a participant and leader. It is a great place to meet new people and make social connections. It is easy because everyone is equal, because no one knows each other. This means the risk to connect is the same for everyone, and everyone has an equal starting point.” – *Student data from the Fostering Connectedness Project (2016–2017)*

3) Diverging Models

When students discussed the qualities they seek in interpersonal connections, their opinions diverge into opposing models. As these models have repercussions for community-building initiatives on campus, we believe that both should be explored before arriving at an integrated understanding of them.

Model A: Safety in Similarity

Many students highlight how they find faith-based community groups and ethnic/cultural community groups ideal for building lasting relationships. Such groups are perceived as having

similar values, interests, and lived experiences, allowing individuals to feel safe and comfortable to “be themselves” without fear of conflict or rejection.

“Like, talking to other Jewish students can be very rejuvenating. And it's like crazy because I can meet Jewish students from other campuses, and, like, we can just like get into a conversation even know we don't know each other because we're speaking a similar language, so that's cool.”

“Meaning and connection...other than just through the people I know, I should also clarify that the Toronto Buddhist church is my family church in the city. So I do have space and place within the city as a part of the Japanese Canadian community. It's important, but also just in general, it's one of those spaces that I can go back to.”

“Yeah, I think it is harder to connect with people who come from different backgrounds. And like, it's unfortunate, because I think nowadays, we talk about, like, diversity and pluralism, and how we want to connect with so many different types of people. But at the end of the day, as much as that's nice, like, you're kind of working more. Like even like now, in this interview, I have to translate so many things. And so like, it's important to share my experience with other people, but it's not comfortable.”

“Because I'm half-Japanese, I'm very drawn to other people who are mixed race and their experiences in life. And sort of a support group, I found.... It took me until I was in undergrad—other than my sister—to meet other people who were half-Asian, or ‘half-this and half-that’, and have life experiences based on being visibly something, but not anything anyone can recognize. And that's something I've been drawn to repeatedly as an adult, is just reading other people's experiences. If I do meet people, half-Asian people can spot each other pretty easily, and it's always kind of exciting to meet someone else....”

Model B: The Value of Diversity

On the other hand, some students value the opportunity to meet people outside their usual circles. Rather than look at personal differences as a possible source of disagreement or tension, such students find value in difference and diversity. Meeting someone who “brings something different to the table” is seen as an opportunity to learn about the broader world, and in doing so, learn more about themselves.

“Yes, I think the most important thing about this relationship is for...both sides of us were willing to listen and accept because you could say we're similar people, but we have different hobbies. We have different interests. Sometimes I don't even see how we manage to find some common topics. But we just do ‘cause we always are willing to accept [each other]. Even if the other one is talking about something that I don't know completely. But I'm willing to just be happy for her and maybe learn something she said that I don't know. And I always highly value their opinions.”

“I think it's great. It's really like having an open mind, meeting new people with different values, backgrounds—that's learning outside the classroom. That's something I really appreciate. It adds meaning to life, we learn from each other. Each person with their own backgrounds [and] values, [they] bring something [different] to the table. [...] Basically, it brings something to Canada and makes us multicultural.”

“So back when I was in Vancouver, my closest friends are Christian. But I guess I recognize that it's a pretty...it's a narrow, narrow view of the world, if you only look at it from one side. So, I guess as I got

older, I just realized how interesting it is to talk to people with a completely different world, you know, that's kind of the type of relationship that I would [be willing to pursue] right now.”

“Well, I really like travelling. So I really like to meet locals from different places. Just hang out and see how they view the world and how there's differences in different parts such as Asia. So I've lived in Asia, Africa, and obviously Canada. So I noticed some small differences, which helps me figure out what type of person I want to be. *[Interviewer: How so?]* I guess rather than letting culture and society shape who I am, I'm able to recognize that that's not the norm in other places. So, it's not an inherent human quality. It's something that you can choose not to.”

Integrating the Models: Mitigating the Paradox of Belonging

Within the design team, this tension between the two models was termed “the paradox of belonging”, wherein students want to feel connected to a broader community but feel more comfortable within smaller, more defined groups of people similar to themselves. While not explicitly stated, students who prefer Model A tended to identify heavily with faith and/or cultural/ethnic identities that frequently face erasure, marginalization, and discrimination in North American society. For this reason, Model A—while focused on interpersonal connections—could be more broadly re-imagined as **fulfilling a need for “safe spaces”**. When students engage with such spaces, they know what and *who* to expect, allowing them to be more comfortable, open, and receptive to deeper social connections. Therefore, while they are not against diverse social groups, such students may have experienced stigma or discrimination when participating in Model B-type scenarios, which has led them to prefer Model A.

An integrated⁵ model for community-building initiatives could take this need for comfort and safety into account, while still promoting diverse opportunities for connection. This could be done by thinking about identity in an intersectional⁶ way, and realizing that diversity extends beyond differences in faith or ethnicity into spheres of gender, sexuality, socioeconomic background, and more. Creating programming and services that provide “safe spaces” requires intentionality in defining which spheres of identity will be privileged in the given context, clearly defining those spheres in public messaging, and allowing for potential participants to decide on their own whether or not they would feel comfortable in that environment. **The ultimate goal of such spaces is to promote comfort with diversity while still providing a sense of social safety.**

⁵ To learn more about Integrative Thinking, visit: <http://www.rotmanithink.ca/what-is-integrative-thinking>

⁶ For more about intersectionality, visit: <https://www.ywboston.org/2017/03/what-is-intersectionality-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-me/>

Theme Two: Finding Purpose and Understanding

When asked about experiences that they found valuable for finding purpose in their lives, students often identified meaningful opportunities as ones that allowed them to learn outside the classroom and broaden their horizons. While these opportunities were sometimes regarded as being beneficial to future goals and informing their personal development, students often referred to the act learning as being valuable in and of itself—especially when presented in opportunities that broke up the monotony of learning through textbooks and lectures. In line with the purpose of the Multi-Faith Centre, students also found meaning through the practice of faith. In all cases, these practices helped students better understand their place in the world and feel connected to a greater purpose.

Insights

1) Challenge and Growth

Students identify the practice of overcoming challenges as an important tool for making meaning and spurring personal growth. Such students tend to be future-oriented and view current challenges as temporary stepping stones to bolder and better things. Students who identify challenge and growth as meaningful aspects of their lives are also likely to partake in opportunities to broaden their horizons (see next insight) and engage with situations or material that challenge their ways of thinking.

“The meaning of life for me is basically challenge, so I would like to face more challenges in my life and have some more growth on my self-consciousness. [...] Basically, I’ll do the things I’ve never tried, and I will try something new and do something challenging instead of doing something simple. [...] From my challenge, I can feel I am stronger, I feel like I gain something. I enjoy that I overcome the challenge. It’s kind of like milestones that I need—lots of challenge in my life instead of doing the same things everyday.... I need to do something different.”

“Yeah. I mean, sometimes I like left with this feeling, like I was saying, that like—as much as I enjoyed the content, I would also feel like, what did—how did I grow from that experience? Like, let’s say me and that woman in a burka—that was definitely a growing experience for me. Other events, like, I just kind of feel like a little bit like, “Okay, so like, I agree”—It was like a reaffirming.... [It] was like, ‘All right, like, I think that people from different faiths should talk to each other.’ So it wasn’t necessarily so mind-blowing.”

2) Broadening Horizons

Students appreciate programming that pushes the boundaries of what they know and introduces them to new forms of knowledge, a preference that they mention both in feedback for existing

programs and in recommendations for future ones. Yet, despite valuing opportunities for broadening their horizons, students prefer such opportunities to be well-moderated and pursued in a “safe way” where they feel comfortable in asking questions. Learning about the world allows students to think deeply about the topics and issues that surround them and gives them a stronger foundation for navigating complex contexts in a way that makes sense to them.

“To, like, to see someone that looks so different from the culture that I’m used to...but what I thought was really interesting about this experience was like, I was speaking to her, and, like, I just assumed—even though I told myself not to—like, my automatic was like, “She must be oppressed.” But, like, she seemed very happy; she was very a very vibrant person. Like, I could tell it, you know, even with that on, like, she even had eye makeup on—like, little things, like I wouldn't have expected, and I also think like eye contact, communication with someone? So I remember that being very cool. I was like, “This is more”—even though I could tell myself rationally that it's more technical—like more complicated—that was also good from an emotional standpoint, to realize that, like, sometimes you have a visceral reaction that you don't necessarily like, like I was wrong. And that was really good. I'm happy to have that experience here.”

“Last semester, they invited a yoga instructor to talk about Sikhism, which is a mainstream religion in India, but I went to the workshop. So I want to learn about other religions; that is part of my life here at the MFC. Also I went to a separate event related to education, like how to build a sharing community here and how to incorporate culture and identity in education, so there were a couple of events I really liked a lot. It was eye opening. I never knew there were other religions that share the same philosophy as Buddhism—that is the wholeness of the universe. [That experience sparked] my passion to learn more about other religions.”

“The more you, the more you know, the more reality you see, I guess. It can be negative or positive, depending on the individual and how they perceive things.... I find that interesting.... Because it's literally a state of mind—you decide whether you want to be positive or negative when you have a certain set of knowledge, or when you increase your knowledge on anything. It can be engineering, religion, or it can be anything.”

[About interfaith programming] “Yes, I get that contentious issues are contentious, but also, we're not necessarily like solving anything, or really getting deep into issues.... We're just scratching the surface. I don't know how to fix that. That'd be something I would [be] interested in pursuing if there was an event that helped do that in a safe way. I don't know if that's possible, even, but that would be something interesting.”

3) Reflecting on Faith and Spirituality

While students value opportunities to challenge themselves and step outside their comfort zones, they also value opportunities to turn inwards and deepen their own faith and spirituality through access and practice. For such students, engaging with their faith helps them to better understand their own experiences, contexts, and communities, as well as relate to the larger world. Additionally, faith may offer its practitioners a clear path or set of guidelines which they can adhere to and feel confident that they are leading a “good life.”

[Interviewer: ‘How do you make meaning in your life?'] “Okay...um, definitely learning Jewish scripture is a big part of it. Throughout my entire life, I've done that. When I was in high school, I was

in a competition—it was like a Bible competition; it was the Hebrew Bible—so like, you had to study like 70 chapters, you'd go to a national competition and I got second place. Then you'd go to Israel for an international competition, and it's like with Jews from all over the world. We would read half the Hebrew Bible, and then they would test you on live television.... It was very stressful [laughs]. That was a weird experience. Like that's—I think—what started it. I was involved in that.... And that was very cool because, like, we were learning Jewish texts and then we were in Biblical Israel, so we were like. 'Whoa, okay, this is like what we're reading.'"

"I think [MFC] supports me in a way...makes me feel at home. It's still a bit different from where I lived in Beijing [laughs]. Yeah. 'Cause [there], I can go to temples. There are not many temples in Toronto—maybe I didn't find them? I see myself represented here. That's kind of a sense of pride here at U of T. That's very important."

"[Buddhism] means inner peace, first of all. [...] I find that it is a good life philosophy. How to find your inner peace. How to share your love in kindness. The world is changing so fast that you need a way to adapt to it. I think Buddhism, on one hand, tells me how to live a calm and happy life. And on the other hand, it is one way of demonstrating Chinese ancient wisdom. I think there is always something related to Buddhist philosophy. Everything is connected. Whatever you are doing now will return to you. So I always keep that in mind."

"[Despite being busy,] I still try to go to church on Sundays. But I guess [that's a big part of being] a Christian [...] It's how you live your life.... You can live out Christian values [and] Christian beliefs throughout the whole week, and how you engage with other people. It's just like—that is life. It's learning and growing and knowing that...God is there and supporting, you know?"

Theme Three: Pursuing Positive Emotional Experiences

In addition to finding meaning in social connections and purpose-oriented activities, students also value the pursuit of pleasurable experiences which make their lives meaningful. Such experiences can result in personal development and feelings of connection to the world, but also serve to help students manage their stress and “live in the moment.” These experiences can take diverse forms, but we identified three recurring insights that most align with the goals of the Multi-Faith Centre: holistic learning experiences, practising faith and mindfulness, and hobbies and leisure.

Insights

1) Holistic Learning Experiences

Whether referencing existing programming or reflecting on memorable learning experiences through past travels, students overwhelmingly appreciate being able to learn in *experiential* ways that transcend the classroom and traditional teaching formats. They love the ability to engage in conversation and learn through interacting with different people, places, and contexts.

“[The part of] exploring new places that makes me happy [is] learning new things in everyday life. I enjoy learning things when I don't feel like I'm actually learning them, but I'm learning them without realizing it. So, it makes it less tedious, it makes it less of a task because you're learning things on an everyday level. *[Interviewer: Can you give an example?]* Like those little field trip that you go on in elementary school [...] like, when you go with your classes for educational [purposes]—like [seeing] historical sites and everything—but at the same time, you have fun.”

“So, what I liked about [the event] is that there was a panel, and there [were] breakout sessions after to discuss it with other people, which I thought was good because sometimes—like, I could read a textbook and tell you what all these faiths say about religious garb. But having the panel and then talking with people who are also interested in discussing it was something unique that the Multi-Faith Centre had to offer.”

“I would like to participate in [fun events], maybe history, lifestyle, and also...the cultural events associated with people that have different religion beliefs. For example, teaching the wisdom that [underlies] their own festivals [and] cultures. If they can share a little bit about the idea, the culture, I think that would be good.”

“The other thing I'm crazy about is travelling [laughter]. I've been to 15 countries so far. And I choose my destinations based on their culture and history; I'd rather go to some countries [that are] rich in culture, although they're so poor, like Nepal. I think this helps me a lot in understanding the people and the country there. Yeah, I'm just a big fan [of] knowing things.”

2) Practising Faith and Mindfulness

While practising faith helps students make sense of the world and find purpose in life, it also acts as a source of positive emotional experiences. These can arise from prayer and practice (privileging feelings such as forgiveness and gratitude), but also from feeling connected to a form of transcendental power. This connection was often described as both humbling and empowering, allowing students to recognize their own limits while feeling protected and cared for by the powers that be. In addition to providing space for positive emotional experiences, faith was also said to be helpful in coping with stress and negative experiences, as practitioners are often able to reframe suffering in a way that is productive and value-consistent (e.g., “I may be having a hard time right now, but I trust that God has a plan for me.”).

“I would say that...I mean, I’m on a journey. So, I’m trying to figure things out. I’m still trying to find and see what I want to do, like with my life. I think that what Christianity has done for me is recognize that oftentimes a lot of things are out of your control, and therefore it’s not worth stressing over a lot of small little things.”

“I’m Christian, so I go to church most Sundays. [I’m trying] to build a relationship with God, Jesus. And understanding and talking to other people who believe the same thing, and through prayer and reflection and personal improvement. [...] So to me, I think that that really helps keep me humble. Just recognizing the things that I have, the accomplishments that I’ve done, the difficulties that I’ve overcome. It’s not necessarily because of my own abilities alone. I can just rely on God and how He... watches over and supports me in motivation, caring for people that may or may not feel like caring for. Yeah, I think...it kind of enhances the good parts of myself.”

“I have slowly - just on my own or through family—learned more about Buddhism. I’ve consistently gone to several events a year, even if I’m not going to service all the time. It’s just like most faith-based stuff...like how to be a decent person in the world. And I know it’s a buzzword now—but like a big part of Buddhism is being mindful of—not just the people—but of everything around you. [...] Part of not being a jerk is also being aware of these things, and the larger repercussions of just daily actions and decisions...and I really...I really liked that it wasn’t a set of absolute rules. It was more just ‘Think about everything, a lot. Think about it more than you usually would.’”

“I found reading oral Jewish law very fulfilling, like that was very inspiring to me...and seminary was that—seminary was like five hours a day of that, and like three hours of Hebrew Bible, three hours of Jewish law, and like discussion. So, a lot of stuff. So...that definitely like sparked an interest for me, and like that is usually how I feel like I can connect.... Like, I find time during my week to do that, and it’s always good to learn with a partner, so like that’s also fun.”

3) Hobbies and Leisure

Students also identify pursuing hobbies and leisure activities as being important to their personal fulfillment and development. Even when the activities themselves are not thought to be intrinsically “meaningful,” they offer an opportunity to take a step back and breathe before re-engaging with ongoing tensions in life. In providing such a time and space, hobbies and leisure offer a particular affordance wherein students feel able to approach mindfulness or meaning-making on their own terms (such as reflecting on a book or movie with philosophical themes).

[Interviewer: When do you feel truly good, and in-the-moment? “I feel like that when I play the piano.... I can have that feeling, I can concentrate on one thing. For example, when I am travelling, I focus on travelling. When I play piano, I concentrate on piano. It’s kind of like, you have fewer things to bother you and [can reach] the state that makes you feel good.”

“There’s a book called... ‘Message in a Bottle’ by Nicholas Sparks. It’s very sad. [...] I like the sense of faith and myth in it. It makes me question free will versus [destiny]. Like basically, it makes me question, ‘Do things happen for a reason?’ It makes me question the meaning of life, [like] is there meaning behind everything? Or do we make that meaning? Or do we make those choices? And we find meaning in them. So, it’s like [the idea of] human choice versus things out of your control.”

“[Video games are] a great, great way to detach myself from my life for a while. So, living someone else’s life... a more thrilling one. I can stop thinking about the things that worry me for a while.”

“Also I like movies because... I like connecting movies to reality and taking lessons from them and [thinking about] how it can be applied to everyday life, and I try to see the purpose of the movie. I like action movies, sometimes comedy, and rom coms too. Those makes me happy.”

“I like painting; I love oil pastel. You know that standard between drawing and coloring? So in the past, I [started doing] oil painting [with a kit] purchased by my grandma. [...] That is something that I stopped doing [because of school], and I think it affects me because it is something that I enjoy and something that I use to express myself. Once I stop it’s like, [long pause] it makes me feel like something is missing. So that’s something that I need to go back to.”

“I went to Hart House every single day. Either on the track or in the weights room. Or, doing one of their drop-in classes? I loved the Zumba classes. [...] So, I went there all the time. I went to the Athletic Centre sometimes, and oh! Hart House’s [art workshop]! I tried to go there as often as possible because I found that doing some form of artistic activity was like, really helpful to my mental health.” – ***Student data from the Trademark Licensing Project (2018–2019)***

Theme Four: Barriers to Engagement

While students are generally receptive to the programming, services, and opportunities offered through the Multi-Faith Centre, they also note that numerous barriers prevent them from engaging as regularly as they may like. While some of these barriers were acknowledged to be unavoidable, others were regarded as small oversights that could be easily amended in the future.

Insights

1) Anti-Proximity and Awareness

Most students noted that the physical location of the Multi-Faith Centre is an obstacle in engaging with the programs and services offered there. Students often discover the centre through external touchpoints, such as online, third-party events, or flyers for programming. Even once students learn about the centre, they often find that the remote location prevents them from attending regularly. Thus, when students do make use of the space and programming, it is usually the result of intentional planning centred around a specific event, rather than out of curiosity or spontaneity.

“Okay, so before going to university I was, like, doing research online; I found the Facebook page, and that’s how I heard about it for the first time. As a Jewish student, I knew about the Hillel building already which is the space for Jewish students on campus. But I was wondering if there was a separate space in general, and that’s how [I] found this.”

“Facebook is my big source. I find that most of the events are posted, so I check it regularly. Sometimes I get emails. I don’t know who sends them. I don’t remember how I signed up, but I get a bunch of them. The MFC is far from my home department (OISE) so I don’t come here much unless there is an event.”

“And the second reason [I don’t use the Centre] is I...I don't often see newsletters or flyers mentioning any events at the Multi-Faith Centre. Like, I don't even know what kind of events they have, when they have [them]—I actually never heard of it before I joined [campus group]. I didn't even know the building I was attending class in was called ‘Multi-Faith Centre’ [chuckle].”

“Logistically, it's in a very weird place on campus—the MFC, like near the forestry building. So, like, I don't know where this is? And also—every single time I come here—I go on Spadina, and I’m like, ‘Oh, I can’t enter this way.’ I have to go the completely other way [to the other entrance]. Like, it's not so accessible.... you have to know what you're looking for in order to find it, which is maybe not the best idea for a Multi-Faith Centre?”

2) Service Design and Programming

While the Multi-Faith Centre privileges the notion that all faith-based students are welcome to use its programs and services, some aspects of their design (e.g., food provided, spaces used) make certain students feel excluded based on their faith or level of background knowledge.

“I have been to one event. It was advertised as an Open Mic Night [but] turned out to be Christian-based. And so that was a bad experience. I wasn't expecting it to be Christian and nobody had advertised it as a Christian thing.”

“A lot of interfaith, multi-faith work is like, when we say that we're all doing the same thing. [A clear example] was last year, there was a talk about Christian-Jewish dialogue, and it was in a church, and according to Jewish law—like one way to follow it and is what I do—I can't go into a church, so I couldn't go to the event.... And I'm sure it was an oversight; I'm sure it wasn't done in any malicious way. But I think that sometimes we get caught up in like, 'Let's all try and be the same because we're all faith-oriented,' as opposed to saying like, 'We have our differences and like, we should get along.' Like, we really do have our differences...”

[Interviewer: Did the MFC events meet your expectations?] “The ones that I went to, for sure. They were catered by a kosher caterer—that's because it was a Hillel event as well. Like, I know I'm complaining a lot about food like, yeah—it's important. And if food's going to be the thing we're all bonding over, as well—like this Muffin Madness thing they have every Wednesday—then it is important that everyone can eat. That's where my expectations have not been filled, because I cannot eat that. And I don't want to feel bad, like the whole point is that this space is supposed to not make me feel embarrassed about what I believe in.”

“And there's another reason [I] haven't said: it's because, well, I just feel like most of the events are for religious people. I mean, I do, I don't really know anything about the events. I'm just...just guessing based on its name. I'm not like completely not interested in religion. I have taken a course on religion before and I like to know something. But I just feel like I prefer to attend maybe academic events with people like me, people who don't have any background knowledge to most religions. So I would feel safer, I would, I wouldn't feel like I don't know what they're talking about.”

[Interviewer: What changes would you like to see in events?] “More information. If background information can be provided, it would be better. [...] For example, if this workshop is about [Islam], if other students are not from the background, [then] they would require more background information to help them get more out of the event. Sometimes I find it a little harder because they assume you know many of the concepts and give detailed examples. [...] I guess the best way to do that is to not assume that everyone knows the basic concepts and do a quick survey to identify different knowledge levels and separate people into groups or have someone who knows a lot to give them background information. [...] It sometimes makes participants feel awkward because they don't know what to say.”

3) Accommodating Spaces

Between the design of the Centre's main space and the prayer rooms, students often feel that the physical space is not accommodating to their individual preferences. This leads them to use other spaces on campus for prayer, work, and leisure.

"It's been interesting.... I don't know how I feel about that yet. Because I'm praying with many different types of people in one space, which I'm not used to. It's just like, there's more thinking that has to be done in a sense because I have to be, like, more on "guard"? Like, even just to pray upstairs, like, I had to do a bit of research and figure out if it was okay for me to pray in the same spaces as other people who are praying to other gods...and like, I don't know if the MFC is aware that I'm doing all that math before I show up."

"There are all these things that I have to think of before I go in there. Like, I have to figure out where east is, like, there's like so many things that are like—in [my faith] building, it's just painted much better for me. [...] Yeah, so that's there. And then also, it's like, clear which direction [of where to pray]. There are prayer books that I can use instead of using my phone. Like, there are certain things that just provide that comfort rather than here...."

"And like, I'm not someone who particularly cares about [aesthetics], but like, this would turn me off. I mean, you could see, like, it's not the most colorful place. Like, it's all stone.... It's like a weird way to have a building...kinda prison-like? [laughs] So maybe that could be fixed."

"I find the space a little bit confusing. The first time I walked in there, I couldn't see any signs. I couldn't find the room I was going. And I walked into a stairs and I was...I walked upstairs, and I was locked in the stairs in the building. And I find it really annoying."

But what do students want to see in spaces?⁷

When reflecting on what students value in spaces on campus, a number of points reoccurred across responses:

- **Comfort and Familiarity:** Students value spaces that provide comfort, privacy, and a sense of "hominess."

[Interviewer: What would you like to see in an ideal space?] "Like a comfortable sofa?"

"If I want to be relaxed or cool [down], I feel like any space that can make me be alone helps me."

"As long as it is quiet, and it is not a new space.... [I would like] a familiar space for me that can help me be calm and quiet."

- **Natural Elements:** Students like spaces that bring aspects of nature inside, as they find them calming and relaxing.

⁷ Many of these insights align with earlier work done by the Innovation Hub as part of the "Chill Spots" project, investigating what students would like to see in campus spaces. If interested, please request a copy of the project report from Julia Smeed.

[Interviewer: What do you like about the meditation room?] “So, the wall is covered in like green plants and has like gentle running water down the wall; and I have a lot of experience in water. I've played water polo and done competitive swimming, so I am water sensitive. When I hear the water I feel at home.”

“In spring time or early fall, I like going outside like, let's say between UC and Convocation Hall, sitting in the big group on the grass. It reminds me of mindfulness when you are actually appreciating the moment.”

- **Access to Food:** On the level of convenience and comfort, students value spaces that either give them immediate access to food and drinks or are close to cafes/cafeterias.

“And maybe some snacks...and drinks”

Accessible, good design, nice to have a door that's open, and a café right across [From interview notes; student did not want to be recorded.]

4) Realities and Responsibilities

Even when students feel motivated to engage with the resources and services provided by the MFC, they often find that ongoing responsibilities and busy schedules get in the way. This tension is often compounded by the location of the Centre, which requires students to invest travel time on top of the time they would spend participating in programming.

[On events that are supposed to be calming] “I feel like there are other things to disturb you [when you] go to the event, like jobs. It is nothing about what the school can do. It's about what the reality is.”

“I find that the reason I don't use [the] Multi-Faith Centre is that it's really far, and I am too lazy or tired to go there for an event after a day of classes. If I see an article or a video on Facebook that can help my meaning-making process, I will be happy to watch that.”

“I think it was just a little lower on my priority [list]. I had a bunch of things on my plate. And I kind of...I'm interested in learning a bit more about what [the] Multi-Faith Centre [offers, and about] other religions. But I guess I'm just trying to figure out my time-management and my schedule, right?

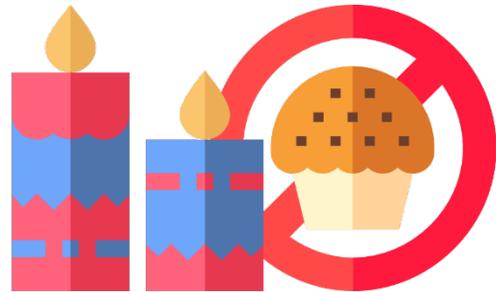
[Interviewer: ‘What are some examples of higher-priority things?'] Well, like applying for jobs for the summer right now, school assignments, and just trying to maintain friendships that I have right now. Yeah, and yeah, cooking at home [chuckle], grocery shopping, and all that stuff.”

“[...] Because commuting takes so much time [and] since most commuters are not that close, it is hard to use all the campus resources. [The] school should make resources more available to students or more accessible.”

Personas

Rebecca's Story

- Highly devout and observant of faith-based restrictions
- Regularly attends programming offered through the MFC
- Domestic student



“I think that sometimes we get caught up in like, ‘Let's all try and be the same,’ because we're all faith-oriented—as opposed to saying like, ‘We have our differences, and we should get along.’ Like, we really do have our differences.”

I first learned about the Multi-Faith Centre when I was doing some online research prior to coming to U of T and wanted to know about prayer spaces on campus. Some of the panels sounded really interesting to me, so I ended up attending them and found them to be really engaging and eye-opening. I especially appreciated the ones that had break-out sessions afterwards, since they allowed me to engage with different people and learn from them in a conversational way. It was a really refreshing change from learning from a textbook!

While I do appreciate the opportunity to learn about different faiths, I do find some of the interfaith programming to be uncomfortable. For example, there was a candle-making session for students who observe solstice-oriented holidays. I wanted to participate, but I couldn't since my religious law says I cannot help others worship gods other than my own. Another example was a session meant to open dialogue between Christianity and my own faith, but I couldn't attend since it was hosted in a chapel and I'm not supposed to enter such faith-specific spaces. I do understand the desire for interfaith connection and religious pluralism, but I wish we could acknowledge our differences rather than lumping us all together and implying we're the same.

I also found that my dietary needs aren't well-supported here, which is discouraging as the Centre is usually really careful about catering food that everyone can eat. My religious restrictions mean that I can't even eat at the weekly Muffin Madness. It's hard to find food that I can eat downtown, so it would be nice if the MFC was better about providing such options for me and my faith-group.

While I learned about MFC when looking for spaces to pray, I ended up preferring to pray at my own faith centre. I do end up praying here about once a week because it's more convenient, but it can be uncomfortable since I have to use the same space as other, different-faith students and some of my prayer verses can get pretty loud. The small space also means that I can't pray in a group, which is always preferable according to my religious law.

All in all, while I do appreciate the Multi-Faith Centre and its mission, I feel like there can be improvement in certain areas. That's why I'm happy that we're having this discussion right now!

Wenqi's Story

- Practises faith, but not strictly or regularly
- Regularly attends programming offered through the MFC
- International student



“Facebook is my big source. I find that most of the events are posted [there], so I check it regularly. Sometimes I get emails. I don’t know who sends them. I don’t remember how I signed up, but I get a bunch of them. The MFC is far from my home department so I don’t come here much unless there is an event.”

When I first moved to Toronto, I wasn’t sure what to expect in terms of pursuing my faith. Back in my home country, there are temples pretty much everywhere so it is really easy to practise prayer, even if most people just attend during holidays. Because temples are harder to find in Toronto, I was really excited to learn about the Multi-Faith Centre!

I first learned about the Centre when I found a workshop about mindfulness being advertised on Facebook. Since mindfulness is something I find very important on the levels of spirituality and wellbeing, I decided to attend. It ended up being a great experience! The workshop had invited a yoga instructor who tied the tenets of mindfulness back to Sikhism, which was very cool because I never realized that concepts important to my own faith could be found in other religions as well. From then on, I stayed up-to-date on Multi-Faith’s programs and events by monitoring Facebook and signing up for the mailing list.

I only wish I could come to the centre more frequently.... It’s on the opposite side of campus for me, so I usually only come by when I have plans to attend an event. When I’m feeling really stressed, I do sometimes make the trek to use the study space. It’s always really quiet and calming there—perhaps because so few people know about it?

While I find the people who host and attend events are extremely nice and willing to share, I did wish that events were a bit more clear about the expected level of knowledge for participants. I’m obviously very interested in learning about other religions, but sometimes I will attend an event and feel scared to ask questions since everyone seems more knowledgeable than me and I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Nadia's Story

- Non-faith
- Does not regularly attend MFC programming, but is interested in it
- Out-of-province graduate student



“I'm very drawn to other people who are mixed race and their experiences in life. [...] It took me until I was in undergrad—other than my sister—to meet other people who were half-Asian, or ‘half-this and half-that’, and have life experiences based on being visibly *something*, but not anything anyone can recognize. And that's something I've been drawn to repeatedly as an adult, is just reading other people's experiences.”

I'm pretty new to Toronto, so I'm really interested in meeting new people. That said, I'm not exactly an extrovert, so I find social events to be kind of intimidating. I like the idea of mindfulness or de-stressing workshops, since they provide a space and reason to meet new people without being explicitly about religion. While I do find value in building friendships with people different from myself, I am a bit wary of participating in faith-based events since I'm not religious and I'm worried that people may try to pressure me into converting. It would be cool if there was more programming that got people together to talk about meaningful things without having it be all about religion.... I would also be interested in programming that is based on cultural identity rather than religious identity. As someone who is half-Asian, I'm really interested in meeting more people who are like me and who share some of those unique experiences.

I find that the U of T campus is pretty isolating. It's so big and can be confusing to navigate. I think I would be a lot more likely to attend MFC programming if it was in a more central location, but they can't really do anything about that.... If anything, I think that events can be a bit better advertised so there's more awareness about what is available. I can't speak for undergrads, but it would be cool if there was a welcoming package or something for incoming students. Or even a visible representative on orientation days.... I think it took me a full year of being on campus to even realize that we had a Multi-Faith Centre. Even then, I found it by accident! One of my department events was catered by VEDA, and I thought the food was really good. I recognized the logo as I was walking by the Centre, so I went in to get some curry and only then did I learn about the MFC.

Implications: Design Principles

The results of this project have a number of implications on future design of programming, services, and spaces at the Multi-Faith Centre—as well as other student-facing services at the University of Toronto. Based on the insights gathered from this project and from secondary literature review, the design team proposes the following model as a guide for supporting the spiritual and holistic well-being of students across campus.



“Does this program help students feel a sense of community and belonging? Does it help inform the way they make sense of the world around them? Does it help them cope with or mitigate stress and negative experiences?” In considering how a potential program or service may have implications within each sphere, service providers can better engage with students in meaningful participation that supports their overall well-being.

The following are some of ways to apply this model when considering programming and services specific to the Multi-Faith Centre:

Community Membership and Belonging

The Multi-Faith Centre features a lot of programming and services that are meant to cater to students regardless of their particular faith associations. However, some aspects of program design result in students feeling unsupported or excluded. Examples of things to consider when planning and designing events:

Dietary Accommodations

- Does the food provided at the event cater to the unique dietary needs of all students attending? Are there mechanisms in place for students to share their concerns regarding food options or to request special accommodations?

Event Space

- Is this event being hosted in a space that is welcoming and accessible to *all* students attending?

Target Demographic

- Is this event explicitly (e.g., closed programming) or implicitly (e.g., hosted by a certain faith group) targeting a certain type of student?

Expected Level of Knowledge

- Does active participation in this event pre-suppose a level of knowledge or familiarity with the topic?

Frameworks for Understanding the World

Students value programming that allows them to better understand the world around them, whether that is through broadening their horizons or deepening their knowledge on a specific topic. However, this learning is best pursued in ways that diverge from the typical classroom and allow for students to pursue knowledge in “everyday” ways.

Interactivity and Social Learning

- Is the workshop in a panel or lecture format? If so, is there an opportunity for discussion among participants and guests?

Relevancy and Interest

- Is the topic relevant to current events or issues? Will engaging with this topic help participants make better sense of the world around them?

Ability to Cope with Negative Experiences

The University of Toronto is a highly stressful environment. Between school, work, and other extra-curricular commitments, students often feel they lack the energy or motivation to attend additional programming if they think it will not be engaging or instrumental. Consider how programs could mitigate this feeling of “overload” by appealing to relaxing or positive emotional experiences.

Room to Breathe

- Are there opportunities to engage students with programming or spaces that are aimed towards destressing or having fun?

Return on (Emotional) Investment

- If students are purposefully engaging with stressful or negative experiences, are they benefitting from the exchange via strategies or mechanisms for better coping or emotional regulation?

Access and Awareness

While it is not possible to make the location of the Multi-Faith Centre more accessible to the larger campus, there are opportunities for extending the reach and awareness of programs and services through other methods.

Building Presence

- What are some methods for making programs and services more visible to the U of T community?
- Examples include social media (Facebook is working well), flyers/posters, welcoming packages to incoming students, orientation representatives, etc.

Building Out

- Are there opportunities for partnering with or hosting events in more centralized spaces on campus? For example, panels hosted in partnership with Hillel were well-received by participants.
- How can such partnerships be used to target students who may require such faith-based access and support?
- Is there viability in offering programming online, so students can engage on their own time?

Building Within

- Are there opportunities for participating students to comfortably provide feedback about a specific service or event? Are there mechanisms in place to take such feedback into consideration and implement changes for future services or events?

Conclusion

Through this project, it was discovered that students find opportunities for making meaning across many spheres of their lives. It is interesting to note that, when asked directly about where they make meaning, participants were often unable to provide a clear answer. For example:

“A meaningful experience I’ve had? [long pause] It's really hard to define meaningful. I mean, I've had a lot of memories that I cherish. But it's so hard to decide whether I should call them meaningful.”

It took further probing and discussion for them to identify aspects or experiences in their lives that they felt gave them a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity. This pattern reinforces the idea that most students do not locate meaning in a clearly-defined form. Rather, when given the chance to reflect, **they are able to identify a sense of meaning and fulfillment in their everyday experiences, whether that is spending time with friends, learning about the world, or reading an interesting book.** For this reason, the design team suggests a *holistic approach* to helping students through this process. In supporting students and their needs *across multiple spheres of life*, the Multi-Faith Centre can provide a space for community, understanding, enjoyment, and spiritual well-being:

- **Community and Belonging:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre support students in finding a meaningful sense of community? How can diversity and religious pluralism be embraced in a way that acknowledges difference comfortably and safely?
- **Finding Purpose and Understanding:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre provide opportunities not only for spiritual practice and reflection, but for pursuing personal growth through challenge and exploration?
- **Pursuing Positive Emotional Experiences:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre use existing spaces and programs to help students engage their love of learning through dynamic experiences, or to approach deeper questions in a low-pressure environment? Is there viability in providing a space for students to just relax, destress, and have fun without engaging in structured programming?
- **Barriers to Engagement:** How can the Multi-Faith Centre make its programming and services more accessible to the student population?

By considering each of these questions when designing future programming, services, and spaces, the Multi-Faith Centre can strengthen its existing connections with students of all faith backgrounds and increase engagement with students who are new to the Centre.

Limitations

While we attempted to recruit student participants from a wide variety of faith backgrounds, many faith groups remain unaccounted for—most notably, Muslim and Hindu students. This is particularly concerning because Muslim students were noted by MFC staff to be regular users of

the prayer space and would therefore likely have unique insights to offer regarding the Centre and its services. Also, Muslim students represent a large proportion of the student body, yet they do not have their own dedicated faith centre. Especially in times of growing Islamophobia,⁸ it is important for Muslim students to have access to a central “safe space” for practising prayer, sharing their experiences, and building community solidarity.

Discussion Questions

- How can existing partnerships and resources be leveraged to fulfill the faith-based needs of students who may otherwise not be well-represented on campus? Would this, in turn, impact how the Multi-Faith Centre allocates its own resources for meeting such needs?
- How can the Multi-Faith Centre balance students’ desire for safe spaces for self-exploration and building relationships with the opportunity to broaden their horizons and prepare them for engagement in a religiously pluralistic society?
- How can the Multi-Faith Centre design interfaith events so that students can engage safely but meaningfully with current issues and conflicts? Is it possible? What would need to be true in order for such an event to be successful?
- How can the Multi-Faith Centre make its spaces, services, and programs more appealing and approachable to students who do not identify as spiritual or religious?
- What are alternative options for engaging with students and supporting their growth and understanding without investing in programming they may not have the time for?

⁸ <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/islamophobia-canada-muslim-students-share-their-personal-experiences>

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